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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HANFORD MEETS RELIGIOUS LEADERS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: IRF Ambassador John Hanford met February 21 with Buddhist and Protestant leaders to discuss issues surrounding the practice and management of organized religion in Vietnam. Both the Buddhist and Protestant representatives acknowledged progress in the religious freedom situation here, but both cited property issues and the desire to expand training facilities as key issues of concern. Although GVN officials will openly acknowledge a belief in Buddhism, Communist Party members who are Protestants will either leave the Party or practice their faith quietly. For the Protestants, the lack of clergy for the nearly 120,000 followers in Vietnam's north is a significant problem. Also burdensome are GVN requirements surrounding the registration of congregations and the requirement to inform local authorities about religious activities and leadership decisions. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, accompanied by Ambassador Marine, met February 21 with Protestant and Buddhist religious leaders. In response to Ambassador Marine's opening question about relations among religious groups, and whether the GVN sponsors an interfaith dialogue, Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN) General Secretary Au Quang Vinh noted that there are few conflicts among religious groups in Vietnam. Nonetheless, there are often informal talks between Protestant and Catholic leaders. Thich Gia Quang, Deputy Director of the International Buddhism Department of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), observed that there are few regular contacts, but that leaders often see each other on important occasions.

Issues Surrounding Finding Religion

¶3. (SBU) Turning to the issue of whether religious groups perceive competition with each other for followers, and if this causes tensions, Thich Gia Quang noted that there is no discrimination between or among religious groups in Vietnam. All Vietnamese are free to follow or not follow a particular faith. In the case of indigenous religious followers choosing to give up family and local traditions for an organized religion, the Buddhist leader could not cite a specific instance of problems being caused. If someone chose to leave Buddhism for another faith, this would not be a problem. No one is forced to join and, conversely, no one can be compelled to remain, Quang said.

¶4. (SBU) Protestants respect the religious beliefs of others, Pastor Vinh said. If someone considers giving up traditional practice for Protestantism, then he or she may

have an internal struggle. Very often, individuals will attend church services and decide to follow Protestantism. This naturally is a significant life change, but it happens across Vietnamese society, even to Communist Party members, Vinh asserted. In the case of Party members, sometimes they will quit the Party to practice Protestantism. In other cases, they will quietly follow Christianity because they "do not dare speak out about their faith for fear of negatively affecting their position." However, the Protestant church encourages them to talk openly about their faith, Pastor Vinh said. Unlike in China, GVN officials who are Buddhist seem to have no problem discussing their faith, Ambassador Hanford observed.

¶5. (SBU) Responding to a question about improvements in the environment for religious belief compared to five years ago, Vinh said that there have been many advances. For example, the number of people attending services in big cities has increased, and these believers are often well educated and, in some cases, Party members. There are now many more ways to discuss Jesus Christ, and, while some believers still feel pressure from family and society, there is less pressure than before.

Buddhists See More Success in Addressing Problems

¶6. (SBU) On the issue of problems faced by organized religion, particularly problems that the GVN could help to address, Thich Gia Quang of the VBS noted that a perennial issue is funding. Another problem is related to a number of pagodas in urban areas that are being used as housing for local residents. The VBS has urged the GVN to relocate these residents and return the property, and the GVN has slowly tried to address this matter. For example, two pagodas in Hanoi were returned this year, and the VBS is waiting to hear about a third. The VBS has also sought permission to open Buddhist schools and land for Buddhist

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training centers, and the GVN has generally been responsive, Quang said. For example, the GVN gave the VBS a total of 30 hectares of land to build two Buddhist training facilities.

Protestants Seek Redress from GVN

¶7. (SBU) The Protestants have had less luck in getting the GVN to respond positively to their concerns, Vinh said. Like the Buddhists, the Protestants have a number of properties that are occupied by outsiders. In another case, a church in Vinh was leveled to construct a park. There has not yet been a response from the authorities to the ECVN's request for replacement land. In another case, a government office is now occupying church property, and the GVN has not responded to ECVN efforts to recover it. The ECVN often seeks permission to repair and rebuild other properties, but to no avail. The ECVN also would like to build a bible training school and additional churches for the more than 120,000 believers within the ECVN's territory. The ECVN seeks the same treatment as other religions in Vietnam, but Protestants are often accused of following an American religion, Vinh said.

¶8. (SBU) Several months ago, ECVN leaders sent a letter to GVN leadership requesting help with property issues, seeking recognition of new congregations and asking for permission to open bible training schools. They also sought a resolution of a property issue involving their headquarters in Hanoi: the GVN currently occupies part of their property, and the ECVN wants it back. At present, there are only 14 pastors to minister to 130,000 followers in northern Vietnam. Pastor Vinh expressed thanks to Ambassador Marine for his help in resolving a property matter in Thanh Hoa Province. In response, the Ambassador offered to continue this kind of cooperation with both the Protestants and

Buddhists, if either group so desires. These issues take time, but focusing on specific cases can help to accelerate resolution, the Ambassador observed.

Protestants Lack Clergy

¶19. (SBU) In response to a question on ECVN cooperation with the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), particularly regarding the training of clergy, Vinh explained that the SECV does not even have enough training capacity for its own needs, let alone the needs of the ECVN. Among the 14 pastors in the north, 13 minister to a total of 7,500 ethnic Kinh Vietnamese. The one additional pastor is ethnic Dao, and his Dao congregation in Lang Son Province numbers about 1,400. In Ha Tay Province, the wife of a deceased pastor also ministers to a number of believers. For the remaining 120,000 adherents, there are no pastors, although there are lay preachers who use bible materials and other resources provided by the ECVN. Overseas Protestant organizations have offered to send teachers, but there are no schools in which they can teach. One option the ECVN has pursued is to quietly send trainees abroad for a course of study that is normally four years, followed by two years of practical training.

Slow Registration Process

¶10. (SBU) Another problem area is the slow registration of new congregations, particularly in the Northwest Highlands, Vinh continued. Only one congregation, in Halong City, was offered registration, but the congregation has balked because of conditions (namely, that the application required the believers' workplace addresses, and they feared harassment from local officials). There are over 1,000 congregations, and over 4,000 meeting points and churches, within the ECVN's territory. The size of each is varied, from 20 to 30 members to over 200 followers. Some are mobile, rotating from place to place and altering the times of their meetings. Of the over 1,000 congregations, all of which are attached to the ECVN, more than 300 have sought to register, and the remainder are waiting to see what happens before deciding. For them, the concern is that registering could lead to greater official control, Vinh explained.

Registering Activities

¶11. (SBU) On the issue of registering activities, Vietnamese law requires groups to provide authorities by October 15 a calendar of their activities, including major events and weekly gatherings, for the year ahead. This is not a

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"reapplication," but an "announcement," Vinh said, and local authorities will provide feedback. The law also forbids religious activities from taking place outside of designated religious facilities. The ECVN has been doing this for the past three years, and, while the system has its good points, there are also bureaucratic hassles. For church leadership positions, local authorities need to be informed, and they will either accept or reject the church's petition. There are rarely objections, and the few rejections are because of "citizenship qualifications," Vinh said.

¶12. (SBU) Thich Thanh Nhieu of the VBS explained that, based on the Buddhists' understanding of the law, unless the activity calendar for next year differs from that of the current year, there is no need to submit a new one for consideration by the local authorities. Furthermore, in terms of mechanics, if a group wants to conduct activities in a commune, then commune officials bear responsibility for making a decision. If more than one commune is involved, then district authorities get involved. Finally, if more than one district is involved, then provincial authorities

take the lead, Nhieu explained. The VBS representatives noted in closing that there are over 39,000 Buddhist monks and nuns in Vietnam, and that there are no age limits or restrictions.

¶13. (U) Ambassador Hanford cleared this message.

MARINE